BLITZEN
THE CONJURER

FRANK M. BICKNELL

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"The passenger continued to regard the boy"

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BY

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PHILADELPHIA

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BLITZEN THE CONJURER

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CHAPTER I

THE BROKEN VASE

"LIKE to go? Of course I should like to go," said the first boy, in a tone at once emphatic and regretful.

"Well, I am going," announced the second boy exultantly. "I sneaked a fifty out o' my pay Sat'd'y so 's I could. Told marm I 'd lost it. She gave me a reg'lar jawin', but what do I care so long 's I get there?"

The first boy eyed the second boy with open disapproval. There was a marked contrast between the two. The first boy's manner was bright and alert, and he looked as if he never had had a dirty face in his life; the second boy looked as if his never had been entirely clean, and he carried himself with a slouchy air that told strongly in his disfavor. They were

standing at a window in the second story of Jewett's crockery and glassware store, and were gazing down into the alley between that building and the theatre known as Vickery's Opera House.

The room was hardly more than a closet, although it had been used to store empty packing-cases, crates, and crockery hogsheads, several of which, with a quantity of straw protruding from them, now encumbered the floor and caused the place to seem even smaller than it actually was.

Above the window the electric-lighting wires entered from the street circuit and were laid along the ceiling to the meter and thence down the opposite wall on their way to the lower story.

Outside, in the alley near the street corner, was a theatrical billboard, on which had been placed a poster bearing the likeness of a fine-looking man with a bald forehead and gray mustache and pointed beard. Underneath this

portrait could be read in large type the name of its original:

"BLITZEN, THE CONJURER."

The entertainment to be given in the Opera House that evening by the world-famed magician was the topic of conversation between the two boys.

"Say, Alvan, do you see that window yonder?" inquired the second boy, pointing across to a small opening in the brick side wall of the theatre building. "I 'll bet that looks right down onto the stage. Wonder if a feller could manage to peek in through it and see anything that was going on."

"Hardly, I should think," replied his companion; "it 's too small and a good deal too high up."

"Yes, I s'pose 't is." The second boy abandoned his idea somewhat regretfully and, drawing back a little from the window, lighted

a cigarette, after doing which he carelessly dropped the half-burned match upon the littered floor.

The other boy, darting a look of reproof at him, hastily set his foot on the tiny though still glowing ember. "I wonder how many times Mr. Jewett has forbidden you to smoke here," he exclaimed. "You 'll be setting the place afire some day unless you 're more careful."

"Huh! no danger," cried the culprit with a disagreeable laugh. "Who minds what old Jewett says, any way?"

Almost at the next moment he answered his own question, when his employer's sharp, high-pitched voice was heard calling up the stairway imperatively:

"Alvan! Wallace! where are you? Why are n't you down here where you ought to be, straightening out this wareroom, I 'd like to know?"

At this summons the two delinquents turned

from the window in guilty haste. As Alvan Stowe, silently and with rapid steps, preceded Wallace Hines across the floor toward the

"'Who minds what old Jewett says?"

stairway, the latter found time to mutter sulkily:

"The boss never will let a feller take a min-

ute to catch his breath, he 's in such an everlasting fret to make him do something that don't need to be done."

Mr. Jewett was standing near the foot of the flight, and as they hurried down he greeted them with the sarcastic words:

"I should be pleased to have somebody tell me what I hire you boys for, or what earthly use you are to me."

He got no response, and probably did not expect one. While he was eyeing the abashed pair with severe displeasure the street door opened, much to their relief, and he turned to meet the customer who was entering. Glad to get off without further censure, the boys began at once the task of setting to rights the displaced stock in the long wareroom.

"Seems as if he liked to shove things 'round where they don't belong just on purpose to make us put 'em back again," grumbled Wallace. "I 'll bet he can muss up this place more for the sake of selling one-twelfth of a dozen teacups than any other man living."

Alvan offered no response to this, but continued his work in silence and with much more assiduity than his companion showed. After a time Mr. Jewett and his customer went upstairs, and soon the two boys, released from surveillance, slackened their efforts and fell at length to "skylarking." Wallace began it; he was a veritable eye-servant and seldom did work that could possibly be avoided. In a fit of boisterous humor he knocked Alvan's cap from his head and, squaring off on the defensive, provoked him to a sparring bout. In knocking off the cap he had struck the wearer, accidentally perhaps, a smart blow on the ear. Alvan resented the injury with spirit, and the blood of both began to get heated. They forgot momentarily where they were, and danced around in the narrow passageway regardless of the glass, china, and other fragile material on either side. By and by, finding he was getting worsted, Wallace lost his temper and tried to grapple at close quarters with

his adversary. Alvan felt himself seized by the throat with no gentle hand, and stepped quickly, almost involuntarily back. His foot slipped and Wallace gave him a savage push, so that his shoulder struck against some object behind him. It proved to be a banquet lamp, and by the force of the blow it fell over against a large Chinese vase which it knocked to the floor, breaking it into several pieces.

Wallace backed hurriedly away, while Alvan stood stock still, pale with consternation. He knew the vase was valuable, and he trembled to think what might result from his heedlessness. A moment later Mr. Jewett appeared on the stairway. From the expression of his face it was only too evident that he had heard the fatal crash. Leaving his customer to find his way out unattended, he strode quickly to the spot where the two boys, as if petrified, were standing. There was a grim tightening of his thin lips and an angry glitter in his red-rimmed eyes that foreboded an unpleasant scene.

"Which of you two did that?" he demanded, with a calmness plainly enforced.

Both boys remained tongue-tied for a moment, then Wallace said, in a tone that was half whine and half snivel:

" 'T wa' n't me, Mr. Jewett. I never touched it. I never went anywhere a-near it, honest I did n't."

"Then it was you," cried the inquisitor, bending his dark brows upon Alvan. The unhappy youth stood mute, white to the lips with despair, and too much overcome even to try to defend himself. Mr. Jewett extended a threatening forefinger. "Go to the book-keeper and get what 's due you," he commanded; then, raising his voice, he called: "Miss Farley, we are going to dispense with this young man's valuable services henceforth. Make up his account and charge him with the value of that Canton vase that came in from the custom-house yesterday."

In times past Mr. Jewett had suffered almost

beyond endurance from the carelessness of boys whom he had had in his employ. To protect himself in a measure from loss by breakage at their hands, he had finally tried the plan of holding back each week a part of their wages, to be kept as a "safety-deposit" as long as they remained with him. When a boy resigned or was discharged —usually it was the latter—he received whatever of this balance of wages might be due him after deducting the cash equivalent of the articles he had broken during the term of his service. Even this guarantee against financial loss was not always sufficient, however, for the most heedless and destructive boys were likely to remain the shortest time, and were almost certain of going away in their employer's debt. This explanation will account for the crockery dealer's harsh and summary dismissal of Alvan Stowe, although the lad had been a faithful worker hitherto and had succeeded in getting farther

into his difficult good graces than any of his numerous predecessors.

Alvan had been with Mr. Jewett about six months and had earned rather more than fifty dollars that he had not received. He was naturally careful and conscientious, and until to-day, except for a few unimportant breakages, had been fortunate in the matter of debits against his reserve fund. Now, as he stood waiting before the book-keeper's window, he was miserably uncertain whether he was to get any money at all. After a few moments of calculation the young lady opened the cash drawer and laid before him bills and change amounting to four dollars and seventeen cents.

"I 'm sorry it is n't more, and I 'm very sorry you 're going, Alvan," she said pityingly.

He picked up the shattered remains of what would have been a fifty-dollar note, at the least, that morning, and, swallowing a lump in his parched throat, stalked away without responding to Miss Farley's low spoken condolences.

Wallace was nowhere to be seen, though he would not have deigned to notice him if he had been, and Mr. Jewett was busy at the farther end of the store, so the disgraced youth walked forlornly out, feeling much like a stray dog that has been kicked into the gutter. So preoccupied was he with his sudden disaster that he fell into a lesser tribulation almost immediately. That is to say he ran blindly against the first passer-by he chanced to meet. A violent outburst of strong language brought him to a realizing sense of the situation.

"You young blunderhead," continued the victim of his heedlessness, "why can't you look where you 're going, and not walk all over folks like that?"

It was a red-faced, loud-voiced, flashily-dressed man by whom he found himself confronted, and it was only too evident that he had been drinking more than was good for him. With a face grown almost as high-colored as the man's, Alvan stammered an apol-

ogy and hurried on to escape further vituperation. He knew the man well enough to wish to avoid a prolonged interview. He was James Naylor, owner of the building in which Mr.

"'You young blunderhead!'"

Jewett did business. Alvan had been used to seeing him come into the store the first day of every month to collect his rent. Alvan knew that Miss Farley dreaded his calls more than a

little. If, by any chance, his money was not ready for him on the instant he was quite likely to break into rough abuse and complaint; if, on the contrary, it was handed to him promptly he would usually try to make himself agreeable to the young lady by paying her compliments, making "pretty speeches" and otherwise showing for her an admiration that was wholly unwelcome. She always drew a breath of relief after he had gone. In the town, Naylor was generally regarded as an ugly customer, and his manner of living was looked upon by good citizens with disapproval. Ten years earlier he had inherited from an uncle a large property, yet, with the horse-racing, gambling, and other costly amusements he continually indulged in, he was always short of money. It had been predicted more than once, by those who were watching his reckless career, that he would go altogether to the bad eventually.

As Alvan walked on he soon forgot the dis-

agreeable encounter with Naylor. He had other things of more importance to think about —his uncertain future for the principal one. He was an orphan, what few relatives he had were far away, and his present home was a boarding-house. He had only himself to depend on for the necessaries of life. He had been suddenly thrown out of a place which he had tried hard to keep, at a time when there were fewer places by far than there were boys eager to fill them.

He was resentful toward Mr. Jewett for his hasty action in dismissing him without a more careful inquiry into the facts of his case, and he was bitterly indignant at Wallace Hines. The latter, though almost the direct cause of his downfall, had made the most cowardly haste to clear his own skirts and slink out of all responsibility. Of a nobler nature himself, Alvan had scorned to try and palliate his fault by accusing his comrade, and Wallace had meanly counted upon his acting—or rather

remaining passive—in just the way he had done. It was a dastardly advantage to take, although not an entirely unlooked-for one from such a boy as Alvan knew Wallace to be. Even the consideration that Wallace had a mother and a large number of small brothers and sisters depending partly upon him for support, so that the loss of his situation would have been a real calamity, did not excuse his despicable conduct.

"The little sneak! How I should like to get even with him!" muttered Alvan, with a vindictiveness such as he never had shown before. "And I will, too, if ever I have a chance."

The course of his wrathful reflections was here interrupted and he himself was brought to a standstill by a little knot of persons which had gathered upon the sidewalk and was overflowing into the street. Its nucleus and cause proved to be a very small, ragged, grimy and forlorn urchin, having half a dozen soiled newspapers under his arm, who was sobbing

and sniffling piteously. A moment after Alvan stopped a well-dressed man elbowed his way into the midst of the assemblage and, leaning over the grief-stricken boy, asked in a kindly, half jocose tone:

"Well! well! dear me! what terrible calamity has been happening here? Wherefore this copious lachrymal effusion? In simpler phrase, what are you crying about?"

The boy tried once or twice to answer his inquirer, but succeeded only in sobbing harder than ever. A larger lad with a sympathetic face, who was standing near, volunteered an explanation.

"He 's lost a quarter, sir, all the money he had, an' he 's bawlin' 'cause his folks 'll lick him for losin' it."

"Ah! that 's bad. How did he lose it?"

"Red Conlon tried to snatch his papers off him an' they had a fight. An' when Red scooted, 'count o' seein' the cop comin', the quarter was gone. He thinks 'most likely Red

took it, unless mebbe it might have fell out of his pocket an' dropped down the sewer hole."

"He 's quite certain it is not in his pocket, is he?"

"Yes, sir, dead sure. He 's went all through himself—I mean he 's felt all over himself, an' so 've I, an' it ain't in his clo'es anywheres."

The strange gentleman looked much interested. "Well, now I have a pretty sharp eye for money," he remarked, slipping off one of his gloves and putting it into his pocket, "a sharp eye and a sensitive touch. Suppose you let me explore a little and see what I can find."

"Hold your noise now, Timmy, an' leave the gentleman look," enjoined the older boy, and the younger, impressed by the stranger's kindly manner, decided to stop crying and allow himself to be searched.

His well-worn jacket had three pockets opening from the outside. Two of these the strange gentleman investigated without result,

then thrust his long, slim fingers into the third.

"Ha! what 's this, a hole?" he exclaimed, his face lighting up, and he gave that part of the garment a slight shake. Thereupon a coin dropped with a clink to the sidewalk. The larger boy stooped quickly and picked it up—it was a twenty-five-cent piece—and handed it to the stranger, who placed it in the grimy palm of the astonished urchin.

"There, my boy," he said, "you see that two heads are better than one, and four hands are better than two. Your money was n't so badly lost as you thought, eh?"

The small boy, grateful no doubt, but too bewildered to voice his thanks, stared alternately at the coin in his hand and the face of the benevolent stranger, who, after having enjoyed for a moment the effect he had produced, nodded pleasantly and walked away.

The excitement being over, the crowd dispersed. Alvan, whose mind had been only half diverted from his own troubles by this

episode, continued upon his aimless way. For some distance the two boys followed not far behind.

"Say," he heard the larger one exclaim, in a puzzled tone, "that was mighty funny. I felt in that same place he did, an' the quarter wa' n't there then, I know it wa' n't."

"I do' know," returned the small boy, still dazed. "Did n't seem's if 't was, but how 'd it get there, then?"

"Perhaps it was n't the same quarter, perhaps he put it there himself," suggested one of the grown-up witnesses of the scene.

"H'm! well, mebbe he did, but he managed it awful slick, for I noticed his hand particular, an' there wa' n't a thing in it that I could see."

Here the boys turned into a side street and Alvan heard no more.

An hour and a half later he was still tramping. In the meantime he had bethought himself to go in search of possible work, but the search had been unsuccessful. There were two

large crockery and glassware firms in town, both of which he had visited, but neither was in need of help. At half a dozen other establishments of different sorts his application had met with unfavorable response. Discouraged and downcast, he was slowly making his way toward his boarding-place when a warning shout, the third or fourth that had been addressed to him, brought him to a realizing sense of his surroundings. He had started to cross a street without looking either one way or the other, and had unwittingly got in the path of a rapidly-driven four-wheeled cab. The cabman had succeeded in reining in his horse by pulling him almost upon his haunches, but Alvan jumped back only in the nick of time, else he certainly would have fallen under the iron-shod hoofs. While he was trying to collect his senses the occupant of the vehicle thrust his head out of the door.

"You had a narrow escape," he remarked, in a tone of much concern. "I trust you are entirely uninjured."

At first Alvan was unable to reply. His heart seemed to have jumped into his throat and to be choking his utterance. Finally, however, he managed to say he was not hurt. Instead of ordering his driver to start on again, the passenger continued to regard the boy with close and interested attention.

"You still look pale and a trifle limp," he said presently. "If you have the time to spare suppose you step in here. I should like to talk with you."

Wonderingly Alvan accepted the invitation, and the cab moved onward. After a moment the man began to ask him questions, which he answered frankly and without a thought of hesitation. There was a certain gravity about his new friend's face, as if he might have been through some great sorrow in the past; yet he had a pleasing smile, and agreeable voice and a manner that was particularly winning. In a short time he had gained an idea of the boy's unfortunate situation.

"I notice you don't say that the breaking of that vase was largely your associate's fault," he continued, eyeing Alvan shrewdly when he had finished his tale.

Alvan blushed and then laughed rather confusedly. "It was n't—entirely," he answered.

The other nodded comprehensively and, patting him on the shoulder, said by way of consolation:

"We must learn to bear injustice and undeserved blame in this life, but we hope all will come right in the end." His face was very grave for a moment, then, laying a slender, well-gloved hand with a sort of protecting air upon his young companion's knee, he continued more briskly: "As you are out of work I am glad I picked you up instead of running you down. I may be able to give you something to do—temporarily at least. Will you come to my hotel with me, where we can talk over matters comfortably?"

"Yes, sir, and thank you very much,"

responded Alvan, who had hardly recovered yet from the daze of his recent misadventure.

Indeed, he was half inclined to believe himself asleep and dreaming. The man beside whom he was seated was the same who had figured as a benefactor to the luckless little newsboy earlier in the day, and, furthermore, Alvan now recognized in his features the original of the pictured face, with its high, noble forehead, its piercing, though kindly eyes, its gray mustache and pointed beard, that had been displayed in hundreds of places throughout the city during the past week. Only a few hours ago Alvan had been gazing longingly at it on the billboard at the corner of the Opera House.

In fact he was no other than the celebrated "Blitzen, the Conjurer."

CHAPTER II

THE MAN IN THE CLOSET

"PERHAPS I ought to tell you before you accept my offer," Blitzen remarked casually, "that my last boy —whose duties will fall upon you—shot himself —"

"What! dead?" broke in Alvan, looking disturbed. "Did he—do it—purposely?"

"Oh, no," the professor of magic hastened to answer; "the shooting was quite accidental. I trust you did n't infer that he put an end to his life because he found me too hard a taskmaster," he added, with the suspicion of a twinkle in his eye. "The hurt was more painful than serious. The cartridge was blank. He wounded himself in the hand while loading a pistol for one of my little public experiments.

He is now in the hospital. I am not sure that I shall not use my influence in finding him a place elsewhere when he comes out. I hardly care to take him back. He was too careless to suit me perfectly."

"Don't you—do you think I shall be any better?" Alvan asked, in some embarrassment. Much as he coveted a place in the conjurer's employ, he did not wish to secure it under false pretenses. "After my breaking that vase this morning are you sure you would n't find me too careless also?" he queried, with an uneasy laugh.

"I don't fear it," Blitzen replied quietly. "Circumstances were against you there; let us hope they will atone and be for you in future. No," he went on, eyeing the boy critically, "I surmise that you have rather a delicate touch and a steady hand. That you succeeded in keeping your position among the glassware and china for six months would indicate as much, certainly. The mishap this morning I don't count."

" As he entered the long apartment "

"Thank you, sir," said Alvan gratefully. "I did try hard to be careful, and with you I will try harder than ever—if you will give me the chance." He might have added that while it had not always been an agreeable task to serve the hasty-tempered Mr. Jewett, he looked forward with eagerness to doing his best for the new friend whose kindly face had won his immediate confidence.

"Very good; I think we shall have no trouble together," said the wizard, patting him amiably on the shoulder. "Now suppose we ratify our compact by going to luncheon, if you feel, as I do, like eating something."

Although the excitement of various kinds that he had passed through had somewhat diminished Alvan's appetite, he made no objection to following his new employer to the hotel dining-room. Yet as he entered the long apartment, filled with well-dressed people, he rather wished he could have been allowed to go home first so as to put on his Sunday suit

and polish his shoes. The attire of Blitzen himself was irreproachable; his glossy hat, his speckless gloves and his mirror-like patent-leathers especially might all have been donned for the first time. As he walked slowly down toward one of the farther windows nearly every eye in the room was turned upon him, and whispers of "Blitzen!" were repeatedly audible to Alvan, who brought up the rear, and who could not but feel rather proud of being seen in such distinguished company. So well used to public appearances was the renowned magician that he paid no particular attention to all this, or feigned not to do so, although no doubt his keen perceptions took in every minutest detail of the sensation he was creating.

Arrived at a table, which evidently had been reserved for him, he motioned Alvan to a seat. He himself, however, remained standing and facing down the apartment so that every one who chose to look that way could get a full

view of him. He gave his hat and overcoat to the waiter, and began slowly and deliberately to draw off his gloves. The first one was no sooner removed than in a most astonishing manner it disappeared. With a well simulated start he turned upon the waiter.

"What have you done with my glove?" he demanded.

"Who? me? I ain't tech yo' glub, suh," protested the negro earnestly.

"H'm!" returned the wizard, pretending incredulity, "see that you take better care of this one," and pulling off the second glove, he rolled it into a ball and went through the motion of handing it to the man. "Got it?" he asked.

The waiter had been keeping his big eyes very wide open, but they opened still wider now. "No, suh, I sho'ly ain't," he answered in ludicrous amazement, for he thought he had seen the glove drop into his palm, yet it was not there, and the magician, opening his own hand, showed that to be empty also.

"Dear! dear! two gloves gone in one day!" Blitzen exclaimed, as if greatly vexed. "Perhaps, however, they are not lost beyond recovery," he continued, and, pouncing suddenly upon the darkey, he extracted a glove from the opening in his waistcoat and its mate from under his shirt collar at the back of his neck. Eyeing the man reproachfully, he rolled the pair together and placed them under a tumbler which he covered with a napkin. Still he did not seem altogether satisfied, and, after hesitating a moment, he said, addressing Alvan:

"One can't be too sure. Before I sit down suppose you lift that cloth."

Alvan raised the napkin, and was dumfounded to see that there was nothing beneath the glass.

"Humph! I suspected as much," cried Blitzen. "Do me the favor to search our friend here!"

The negro was now fairly speechless, so that his bewilderment could scarcely have been

added to when Alvan drew from one of his inner pockets a pair of gloves, the same to all

"Extracted a glove from his waistcoat"

appearance that had lately been covered by the tumbler.

The magician sat down amid a ripple of laughter and a murmur of applause from the

spectators, for everybody in the room had been watching this little comedy with vivid interest.

"All that by way of advertisement," he remarked in a low tone to Alvan. "I use just five gloves in that little experiment. Perhaps you can study out how I —"

The sentence remained uncompleted, for the speaker seemed to have forgotten all else to stare with a strange expression at a man who had just entered the room. Noting this, as well as a sudden loss of color from his patron's cheeks, Alvan turned involuntarily to discover what had been the cause of his agitation.

"That is Mr. Naylor, my late employer's landlord," he volunteered, on recognizing the new comer.

"Ye—yes, we have—I—I know it. We were acquainted—once," Blitzen returned, in an unsteady voice. He said nothing more, and Alvan was left in doubt as to whether he was too much interested, or not enough so, in Naylor to wish to talk about him. Apparently,

however, the sight of the man had taken away most of his appetite. He ate scarcely anything, spoke not at all, and it was only when—after dropping beside his plate a handsome fee for the waiter—he had left the dining-room that his customary serenity began to return.

The duties of the new assistant to the professor of legerdemain were light in the outset, and it may be added that his wages, above his living and travelling expenses, were light also. He was entrusted with the care of certain pieces of the simpler apparatus, and there fell to him also the clearing away of the litter after the tricks, or "experiments," as Blitzen preferred to call them. Such articles as scattered playing cards, colored ribbons, little flags, paper shavings, bran, etc., which were strewn recklessly about the stage by the performer, he was expected to collect or sweep up and take care of. This included the gathering up and replacing in packets of the brilliantly colored artificial flowers which seem to be pro-

duced from nowhere out of nothing in the ever-popular cornucopia trick. This of itself alone involved an immense amount of labor, as a hundred of them when closed and confined by a rubber band could be held concealed in the palm of the hand, although when allowed to unfold by springing open they would fill a good-sized basket.

The formal installation of Alvan Stowe as aid to Blitzen the Conjurer was accompanied by one rather curious ceremony. He was required to take a solemn oath before a notary public, and also to sign a written declaration in the presence of the same functionary, that he never would talk about or disclose to a living person the slightest hint of his employer's professional secrets. And the solemnity with which this promise was exacted would almost certainly have made it binding upon a far less conscientious boy than Alvan.

At the end of the week the great necromancer finished his engagement at Vickery's

Opera House and went away with his company to the place where the next date was booked. It was more than four months later when Alvan saw his own city again. At the beginning of September Blitzen revisited it to open with a matinee on Labor Day. By now the new boy felt that he was new no longer.

"He was new no longer"

He had travelled far, seen much, and, in his own opinion at least, was quite the veteran. As for his relations with his employer, they had been pleasant from the start and bade fair to continue so.

"Alvan," said the magician on the morning of the opening day of the second engage-

ment, "as you will have seen from my advance notices, I purpose presenting to the public of this city this afternoon, for the first time on any stage, my illusion which I have chosen to call 'Dismemberment.' The apparatus I am to use will come to the theatre early this forenoon, and will be set up experimentally at once. I am going to ask you to see that it is in proper order, although of course I shall take extra precaution of inspecting it personally just before the performance. You are working in with us very well, and are doing even better service than I had hoped for. It is a great relief to have somebody at hand whom I can trust and depend upon. As you have long ago discovered, there are almost countless details to be looked after to ensure the smooth running of this business, and a man in my position needs the very surest and most capable assistants. I shall count on you more and more to relieve me of certain responsibilities."

Alvan flushed with pleasure at this token of his patron's trust in him, and promised to do his very best to merit it.

"Now as to this 'Dismemberment' illusion," Blitzen went on, "it is not a new experiment strictly speaking, but rather an adaptation of my own of certain principles which have been used by professors of magic many times already. To describe it briefly as it will be seen from the auditorium, a living man standing in full view on the stage, after vanishing and reappearing several times, begins to shed, one at a time, his arms, his legs and at length his head, all five of these parts of his anatomy going off in different directions. After a brief interval the errant members come back and rejoin themselves to the trunk, and the man steps forward to the footlights, as whole as if he never had apparently been taken to pieces.

"You know enough of similar deceptions to know that they depend upon an optical illusion of one sort or another. My main reli-

ance for the production of this trick is a large plate of perfectly transparent glass that can be seen through without the spectator's suspecting its presence when there are lights behind it only, but which acts as a flawless mirror when there is complete darkness at the back and an illumination in front. This sheet of glass is to be inclined toward the spectators at an angle of forty-five degrees, and when called into play as a mirror will reflect certain appearances from under the stage—through an open trap—which would otherwise be invisible from the seats in the house, and which appear to be taking place at the back of the stage. When not in use this glass will be raised and remain suspended in the flies above the stage. As I shall be busy with other matters I wish you to take it upon yourself to see that it is always in the proper position when needed, and well out of the way when not."

"Very well, sir," Alvan responded, "I will attend to it."

About two hours later Alvan finished helping set the stage for part first of the afternoon program. The other assistants had left and he was taking a last look around to make sure that all the gilded furniture, showy apparatus and other impressive paraphernalia was in order. By and by, as he turned his gaze upward he noticed that the big sheet of glass that was to be let down for the final and crowning experiment of the performance had been suspended in such a manner that if lowered as it was it would present its edge instead of its face to the "house." It had been placed in this way in order to keep it from any chance of being knocked against by the scenery when it should be moved. Alvan made a mental note to remember to have it turned so as to face in the right direction after it was lowered, else a hitch and delay in the presentation of the illusion would result.

While his eyes were raised he observed something else that caused him to forget for

the time the matter that had seemed so important a moment earlier. The stage was comparatively dark, the upper part being particularly so, and for this reason the big piece of glass had become a mirror in which a portion of the side wall of the stage was reflected. Directly in line with this reflection was an open window through which could be seen another window. The latter was the same one at which Alvan and Wallace Hines had been standing on the memorable morning that the Chinese vase was broken. The light was sufficiently strong for Alvan to see through the mirrored open window into the room beyond quite distinctly.

It presented much the same appearance now as when he had been in Mr. Jewett's employ. There was the usual litter of straw-filled boxes, barrels and tierces, and in every other way it wore its old familiar aspect. But what aroused the boy's especial attention was the fact that the room had an occupant. The day

being a holiday the store was closed so the person he saw could hardly be Mr. Jewett, who on such occasions was wont to remain at his home some miles out of the city. Who, then, was it? Some one whose right to be there was questionable perhaps. He stood with his back toward the window, over by the wall near the electric light meter, and the loss of distinctness by reflection and distance was too great for the observer to make out who he was or what might be the exact nature of his occupation. It was certain, however, that he was intently busied in doing something.

After a few moments he suddenly turned and, coming to the window, cast a quick, furtive glance around, then closed it. Meantime Alvan had recognized him as James Naylor, the owner of the building, and had seen also that he had in his hand a large open jackknife.

Alvan began to reflect rapidly. As a leased property, he reasoned, is supposed to belong for the time to the lessee, Mr. Naylor, under

ordinary circumstances, would no more have free access to the crockery store than if he were not the actual owner of it. That his tenant knew and approved of his being there Alvan seriously doubted.

It happened that a pair of opera glasses, to be used by Blitzen's assistant, Gustavus, during a so-called "mind-reading seance," lay on a table in the wings. Alvan stepped out and got them and returned to his former position. Hurriedly adjusting the focus to suit his eyes, he brought them to bear upon the reflected interior of the little room across the alley. Although the clearness of the picture thus obtained still left something to be desired, he decided after a few seconds that he could guess what Naylor was doing. And if he had guessed correctly it would have been very strange indeed if he were doing it with Mr. Jewett's knowledge and approval.

CHAPTER III

A SERIOUS ACCUSATION

AFTER leaving the theatre Alvan went to the front door of the crockery store and, without making any unnecessary noise, tried it to see if it was fastened. It proved to be, as he had expected, and he walked away in a troubled state of mind. He had not gone far, however, before his ponderings were interrupted by an unceremonious slap on the back and the words:

"Hulloa, old feller! how are you anyhow?"

With a frown at the boisterousness of the salutation, he looked up and found himself face to face with his former comrade, Wallace Hines. This was the first time they had met since the Canton vase disaster. Although

Alvan was far from regretting having left the crockery store, the particular manner of his leaving remained an unpleasant memory with him, and his feelings toward both Mr. Jewett and Wallace were still sore. But Wallace seemed to think there was nothing in that little episode for him to blush over. Evidently his conscience was not one of the sort that is affected by nice scruples. He addressed his old associate with an expansive grin on his freckled visage, quite as if they had parted on the best possible terms. He overlooked entirely the other's cool reception of his greeting, and began at once to ply him with questions, meanwhile noting in evident admiration, perhaps not unmixed with secret envy, his neat suit of clothes and his generally spruce appearance.

Not wishing, for several reasons, to be communicative about his own personal affairs, Alvan turned the current of questions upon the questioner and feigned an interest in his wel-

fare that easily enough set his tongue to wagging.

"Are you with Mr. Jewett now?" Alvan asked.

"Ho! I ain't been with old Jewett for a long while," was the answer, in a tone as scornful as if the china and glassware dealer had been the very scum of the earth. "He was too mighty particular for me. I cracked an old pitcher about a week after you left, and he flew into a fit, 'most, about it, so I up and quit. I 've been in half a dozen places since then," Wallace concluded, with a reckless laugh.

Alvan could well believe this statement, and he suspected that he had not stayed long in any of the half-dozen. He looked as shabby and soiled as if he had not had a cent to call his own for at least six months.

"I was with old Naylor last," he went on. "You remember Jim Naylor, o' course. I did n't stay long, though that was n't my

fault." He paused a moment, scowling angrily. "Say, Al," he presently continued, in a confidential tone and making the confession rather sheepishly, "I 'd got kind o' sick o' moving 'round from pillar to post so, and—and mother she needed what I could earn awful bad; so when old Naylor give me this chance to help about his stable I did try mighty hard to suit. But it wa' n't the least bit of use. He 's just about the ugliest, most cantankerous, unreasonable customer I ever 'tempted to tackle, and don't you forget it. One morning he come out there awful cross and crabbed, and just because some little thing wa' n't precisely all right about one o' the harnesses I had charge of he flew out forty ways to once and give me the shake. And that wa' n't the worst of it either. I got my mad 'way up and give him some back talk, like anybody would at being bounced for nothing, and he—kicked me out into the driveway."

"That was rather—severe," commented

"'I'll make it hot for him:'"

Alvan, who could not feel entirely sure the little scamp had not deserved all he got.

"He 'll be sorry for that kick some day," Wallace declared, breaking out afresh at the memory of his unhandsome treatment, "and don't you forget that either. He 'll get come up with yet. I 'll make it hot for him, and I told him so to his face."

"Seems to me I would n't talk quite so loud," cautioned Alvan. "Remember we are in the public street."

"I don't care a rap who hears me," returned the other boy defiantly, yet lowering his voice nevertheless, "I 'll just make it hot for him."

"How do you propose doing it?" Alvan inquired, eyeing him curiously.

"Oh, I—I don't know," Wallace answered, wagging his head with vague menace, "but my chance 'll come, and then he 'd better look out. Though he 's going to the Old Harry pretty fast without anybody's help," he added, smiling maliciously. "He 's drinking like

everything, and losing money right and left at cards and horse-racing. Danny Doane, his coachman, told me that and a lot of other things, and he 'd ought to know. Old Naylor 's a terrible plunger and he never comes out on top. He 's short of cash just about the whole time, and hardly knows which way to turn to lay hands on another cent. That money he got from his rich uncle must be pretty much all gone, and he 'll be poorer than he was in the first place before he 's many months older—that 's what Danny thinks."

Although Wallace's information was not wholly without interest, his loud-mouthed manner of giving it was so far displeasing to Alvan that he took the first decent pretext for parting company with him. He then resumed his former train of reflections, without, however, being able to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. If Mr. Jewett had not lived so far away, and if he had been on speaking terms with him, he might have gone and told him

what he had seen, and perhaps thus have got it off his own mind. He felt loath to seek counsel of Blitzen because any mention of Naylor must inevitably be disagreeable to him. At some time in the past something of a particularly unpleasant nature must have happened between Blitzen and Naylor, and Alvan did not wish to run the risk of recalling its memory to his kind employer by so much as the mention of James Naylor's name.

Late that night Alvan was partly awakened by a clanging of gongs, a rattling of wheels and a quick clatter of hoofs in the street below his window. He dimly realized that there might be a fire somewhere in the neighborhood; but he had become too well accustomed to midnight noises of all sorts during his hotel life to heed them especially, and he merely turned over and went off sound asleep almost immediately. He did not wake again until long after the coming of daylight.

It was usual for Alvan to take breakfast

with one or more of the members of the "Blitzen Company." This morning he was joined at table by Gustavus, the conjurer's right-hand man, and his wife, both of whom had prominent parts in the "show." Mrs. Gustavus was an American born, but her husband was of German parentage, although he had come to the United States in boyhood. He was a large blond-haired young fellow, and possessed of a phlegmatic temperament that no ordinary happening seemed able to disturb. Now, however, certain signs of excitement were visible in his usually placid countenance. He had a newspaper in his hand, and he remarked as he sat down, forgetting to return the boy's morning salutation:

"That was what you might call a close shaving. Did you see? We escaped from being scorched last night, eh?"

"Close shave, Gus," corrected his wife. "He means a close shave, Alvan—by last night's fire, you know."

"What! it was n't the hotel, was it?" Alvan exclaimed, recalling the disturbance that had awakened him. "I did n't hear any sounds of alarm in the corridor. The walls of my room were n't warm enough to keep me awake. Was the fire really near us?"

"Not near us in our beds, no," replied the German. "I referred not to ourselves personally so much as to our show that was so closely to being singed. The Opera House, it went nearly up in smoke."

"Gustavus, you don't mean that at all," again interposed the lady. His queer English seemed to trouble her far more than it did him. "You mean it nearly went up in smoke —nearly caught fire, that is."

"Exactly, that is what I said," returned the German, with undisturbed serenity. "The building at the next doorway to the Opera House is—well, it is not any more there. It has been burned to the finish."

"The crockery store—was it Jewett's crockery store?" Alvan inquired eagerly.

"So I think," Gustavus answered, referring to the paper. "Yes. Occupants, Jewett & Co., partially insured. Owner of building, James Naylor, fully insured."

"How did it catch? What caused the fire?" demanded the boy breathlessly.

"I will see," said Gustavus, and, consulting the paper again, he began to skim from the lengthy account of the fire that covered the space of several columns: "Origin unknown—thought may be incendiary—yesterday a holiday—no fire lighted by occupants. So! well, lucky for us is it the theatre a strong fire-resisting wall had; elsewise might the stage by the conflagration have been attacked and much harmful damage done. The big plate glass should we have lost, also much other costful and not-easily-to-be-replaced apparatus."

He laid aside the paper and turned his attention to his breakfast. Alvan had not been listening to the conclusion of his remarks

with much heed. The injury to their employer having been happily averted, his mind was free to busy itself with speculations about the building that actually had been burned.

A suspicion was beginning to take form in his mind that James Naylor could have cleared up the mystery of the origin of the fire had he but chosen. According to the newspaper he was fully insured against loss, and Wallace Hines had declared he was badly in need of money. Might he not be more than willing, then, to make a quick sale of his property by burning it and collecting its value of the insurance company? In short, had he not himself set the building on fire?

For the next two days Alvan watched the papers closely for further comment upon the fire, but he saw nothing that fell in line with his own suspicions. Nobody so much as hinted that the person most interested had anything to do with it. Alvan began to think

he had deluded himself and started out on a false trail. Then, Thursday evening, there appeared an announcement of an unexpected and startling nature.

A fifteen-year-old boy, of not very savory reputation, had been arrested in the belief that he had been directly concerned in setting fire to the burned building. The name of that boy was Wallace Hines.

It seemed that there were weighty grounds for basing this charge. It was known that he had been in the employ both of Mr. Jewett and Mr. Naylor, and that he had been summarily discharged by each in turn for unsatisfactory service. It was known further that his past record was not exactly a shining one in any respect, that he had vaguely threatened each of his former employers, that he had been heard to assert that they would repent having turned him off, and, finally, that on the evening of Labor Day he had been seen loitering about the destroyed building in what was now

thought to be a suspicious manner. To be sure all this furnished no direct evidence that he had started the fire, still there was enough of a circumstantial nature to warrant his being locked up in the city jail to await an examination.

Alvan was considerably shocked at this piece of news. If such a misfortune had happened to his one-time associate a few months earlier he might have been inclined to say uncharitably that it served him right. He recalled well his vindictive wish to "get even with the little sneak." Here was perhaps a chance to take his revenge, and to take it in the very easiest possible manner. He would simply have to hold back and say nothing, to let affairs take their natural course. No one would be the wiser, and no one could reproach him for his action, or inaction, in the matter. He believed Wallace to be innocent of the charge laid against him, but if nobody said a word in his favor there was certainly trouble

of the gravest kind ahead for him. Alvan had reason to feel tolerably sure that if he were to have an interview with a lawyer the information he could furnish might turn the current of suspicion from Wallace to Naylor, whether the latter could really be convicted or not. Should he make an attempt to do this? Somehow the thought of "getting even" with Wallace for the wrong the latter had done seemed less attractive now than formerly. It would be a terrible thing to be locked up for a long term of years, and to be locked up on a false conviction, too. It was a fate he could not wish for his worst enemy, and he no longer felt Wallace to be an enemy at all. Moreover, apart from the ruin a sentence to penal servitude would bring into the boy's life, there was his mother to be considered. It would be a sad blow to Mrs. Hines if her son were brought to trial, and a much greater one if he were proved guilty. Alvan resolved to attempt to see the unfortunate youth and satisfy him-

the disgrace he had brought upon himself and the family. This state of affairs so shocked Alvan that he took up Wallace's defence more warmly than he might have done otherwise. His stout assertion of her son's innocence had its effect upon her, and presently she softened so far as to break down and burst into tears.

"Yes, yes, I know I had n't ought to 've said what I did," she exclaimed remorsefully. "He never done it, and I 'm to blame for blaming him. Wally 's a pretty middling good boy in the main, as boys go—as good 's I could expect any way. I 've tried to do my duty by him, but there 's near a dozen more of 'em, and me a widow working sixteen hours and more out o' the twenty-four to keep soul and body together, and o' course I ain't had, nor could n't have half time to look after him properly as a growing boy 'd ought to be looked after. Wally may have been a little mite wild and unruly now and then, but he never 'd have done anything bad enough to get put in jail for, I 'm certain of that."

"That 's so, and we 'll do our best to get him out," said Alvan soothingly; and then, as her tears made him feel very ill at ease, he prepared to take his leave. Before doing so, however, he bethought himself to add:

"Now, Mrs. Hines, if there is anything I can do for you I wish you would let me know. Of course while Wallace is—is n't at work he can't be earning any money, and if—if you would allow me to—to lend you a little something to keep you along I should be most happy to do so."

This offer was not made without some stammering and blushing, for it is usually a delicate matter to give alms when it has not been asked for, even though it is put in the form of a loan, but Mrs. Hines took no offence; she merely replied, with evident gratitude for his kindly intentions:

"Thank you, I 've got money enough to last for the present, and if I keep my health I guess I shall manage to scratch along. I 'm just as much obliged to you, though."

The more Alvan considered this theory of the origin of the fire the more hopeful did he become that his evidence—the outgrowth of what he had seen reflected from Blitzen's big plate of glass—somewhat shadowy though it might be, would suffice to implicate Naylor and clear Wallace. Insurance companies are naturally suspicious; they must be so for their own interests as a protection against fraud. In case Wallace was proved to be the incendiary they would have to pay the loss, whereas if it could be shown that Naylor was responsible for the burning of the store the company would be released from any payment whatever. It therefore would be strongly for their interest to fix the blame upon Naylor.

As this view of the case presented itself Alvan's hopes mounted high; then suddenly two considerations forced themselves upon him and brought a look of dismay to his countenance. One of these was that he had read somewhere that the witnessing of an act by

reflection in a mirror could not be taken as evidence in a court of justice. The other was that his oath to Blitzen would forbid his making any mention whatever of the piece of plate glass which played so indispensable a part in what he had seen.

CHAPTER IV

ALVAN'S APPEAL TO THE WIZARD

ON the evening after Alvan's visit to the city jail something happened that gave him several very uncomfortable moments. It came about through his allowing his mind to dwell too persistently upon Wallace Hines and his unfortunate situation, to the neglect of his immediate and important duties.

Among the feats performed by Blitzen nightly with great success, was one called the Magic Decanter. It may be described thus: The conjurer filled an ordinary glass tumbler with wine, and a second one with water; then he poured the contents of both into a decanter which he placed upon a small metallic-topped stand. After putting an empty glass on each

of two other stands, one on either side of the first, he concealed all three of the receptacles beneath similar tall extinguisher-shaped covers, and announced that he would cause the mixed wine and water to separate and pass into the empty glasses, the spectators being allowed to choose which glass each liquid should presently appear in. The selection having been duly made, he fastened a narrow ribbon to the centre cone and stretched it thence to the tips of each of the side ones. This was done, he explained, to facilitate the passage of the two liquids by capillary attraction. Half a dozen mysterious passes were next made with the necromancer's wand, and finally the three covers were lifted, when, lo! the decanter, which had been filled with a mixture of wine and water, was seen to be empty, while the glasses, empty before, now contained the one wine, the other water, as the spectators were invited to prove to their own satisfaction by drinking of them.

The secret of this rather mystifying trick was this: In the under side of the decanter was a small hole stopped with wax that could be removed when the decanter was put upon the stand (at the moment before it was covered from view), thus allowing the contents to run down into the stand, which was made hollow, with several holes in the top to receive the liquid. Furthermore, each of the cones placed over the empty glasses enclosed in its upper part two reservoirs, one of which was filled with wine, and the other with water. At the bottom of each of these receptacles was a small hole; at the top, on the surface of the cone, was another. The last mentioned were plugged with sealing-wax, red in color for the chamber which held wine, and green for the one holding water. It is hardly necessary to add that the spectators were not allowed to see these plugs, much less to suspect their existence or that of the secret reservoirs. According to the choice signified from the audience,

one of the wax stoppers was secretly removed from each cone the instant after it was placed over the glass. This allowed the air to enter at the top, and the liquid to run out at the bottom into the tumblers beneath; into one wine, into the other water.

It was Alvan's duty before each performance to see that these four little receptacles were properly filled and plugged. Heretofore he had attended to the duty with the most scrupulous exactness, but on this particular evening it turned out that he had been sadly remiss. The Magic Decanter trick did not go off with anything like its accustomed smoothness, for when the wizard came to lift the covers for the grand triumphant finish both glasses were found to contain wine. His young assistant had transposed the plugs in one of the cones, and had stopped the wine receptacle with green wax in place of red.

From his position in the wings Alvan observed the fatal result of his bungling. He

"Alvan observed the fatal result"

gave a gasp of dismay and his knees fairly shook under him. If the fate of a battle had turned upon his negligence he could hardly have been more upset. Any hitch whatever in the performance, though from no fault of his own, would have made him nervous and filled him with anxiety, so closely allied had his personal interests become with those of his kind employer; but a hitch that threatened dire disaster, and which was due entirely to his blunder—that was almost enough to overcome him entirely. In his guilty consternation he longed to have the floor open and swallow him from sight, but, although there were many traps in the stage, none of them seemed inclined to go out of its way to perform for him this friendly service.

However, Blitzen was far too experienced and accomplished a master of his art to allow himself to be disconcerted by the unforeseen ending of his "little experiment." For one agonizing moment Alvan thought he was non-

plused, but he need not have feared. No doubt the resourcefulness of the wizard had been similarly tried in the past, and it would be safe to say it had seldom been found at fault. Assuming an exaggerated expression of surprise, accompanied by a melodramatic start, he exclaimed:

"Dear me! dear me! this is truly remarkable. Such a state of affairs I am quite at a loss to explain. Allow me to think a moment." He tapped his forehead and wrinkled his brow as if in deep cogitation. "Ah! I have it, I see it all," he cried. "This unexpected appearance of so much wine in your good prohibition town has been caused by that fire which lately occurred next door."

This he said with well-acted satisfaction at having explained everything perfectly. Then, as if aware of an appearance of perplexity on the faces of some of his audience, he continued:

"You look incredulous. You don't agree

with me. Listen. This fire of last Monday night developed quite naturally a vast amount of heat. I am sure if it had occurred a few hours earlier while you were assembled here, you would have admitted that even this theatre, though not on fire itself, was too warm a place to remain in. Very well. You all know that heat can be changed into electricity, and conversely, that electricity can be transformed into heat. You don't see the connection with the case in hand? Wait. By the high degree of heat generated among them, the ruins next door have become an immense storage battery from which a current of electric fluid has begun to flow in our direction. This current has been attracted by the metallic stand, or perhaps being a thirsty, devouring sort of current, the wine was the main attraction. But it could not get into the decanter through the glass on account of the latter's well-known insulating properties. Being apparently determined to gain access to the wine, what does this sly,

insidious current of electricity do but change itself back into heat, after which, as glass is an excellent conductor of heat, it was enabled to penetrate the glass without the least opposition. Now heat, as you know, has the effect of swelling whatever matter it enters into, whether solid, liquid or gaseous. The contents of the decanter, therefore, was increased in bulk. The wine, being the lighter of the two liquids, rose to the top and took the first opportunity of passing off. Suppose we now empty our tumblers, replace and recover them, and repeat our former incantations. There, you see," triumphantly concluded the performer, having suited his actions to his words, "we now have the glasses both filled with water."

The foregoing "patter," which, of course, was the veriest nonsense, was delivered so glibly in the conjurer's sprightly and inimitable style that the threatened failure was turned into a brilliant success. Those who

had seen the trick before supposed that a variation had been purposely added, and those who beheld it for the first time did not dream that any change had been made from the advertised program.

After being bathed in a cold sweat of apprehension, Alvan at length drew a long breath of relief, though he still felt far from wholly comfortable in mind. He knew that he deserved severest reproof and even summary dismissal.

At the close of the performance he fully expected to be sent for, but no summons came, and on inquiry he learned that shortly after the final fall of the curtain the wizard had received a telegram which had caused him to leave the theatre in some haste.

Next morning, as early as he could venture to do so, he sought out his employer at his rooms at the hotel. When he entered, Blitzen was walking the floor, looking as haggard and worn as if he had not slept at all during the

night. The boy knew that he sometimes got rather fatigued under the strain of his evening's labors before the public, and he suspected that he also had some other worriment upon his mind. Therefore his conscience smote him afresh at the thought that he should have done anything to add to these troubles.

"Well, Alvan," the conjurer said interrogatively, as his caller stepped hesitatingly forward.

"I have come about what—about the mistake I made, sir," the culprit began falteringly.

"Ah! oh, yes," returned the wizard, quite as if he were recalling something that had happened a long time ago. "You were thinking of other things when you loaded those reservoirs, were n't you?" he queried mildly.

"Ye—yes, sir," said the boy, hanging his head. "I hope—I am very sorry, sir," he stammered contritely.

"Well, in future be careful and keep your mind on your work, or you might cause me

serious embarrassment one of these days," cautioned the magician, and there the interview seemed about to end.

But Alvan's conscience protested against his being let off thus easily. Instead of slipping away the first moment he had the chance,

"'When you loaded those reservoirs'"

he stood shifting his weight uneasily from one foot to the other for a space, then, with a very red face, blurted out:

"Mr. Blitzen, I—I think you ought to—to scold me. I 'm sure I deserve it. I—my carelessness was inexcusable."

The conjurer's features were touched by the

faint shadow of a smile. "I hardly know how to scold, my boy," he returned. "Was anything in particular troubling you that made you so absentminded?" he asked, after eyeing his young assistant curiously for a moment.

Alvan did not answer at once, but after a short silence, thinking it best to be frank, he exclaimed: "Yes, sir, there was, there is something that I can't keep out of my thoughts. It has worried me a good deal."

"Do you want to tell me what it is? Can I help you in any way?" the conjurer queried kindly.

"Thank you, sir," was the grateful answer; "if you could spend time to listen I should like very much to ask your advice."

"Certainly. Pray go on."

"Last evening when—when that mistake happened, you spoke of the fire in the building across the alley." Thus clumsily did Alvan broach the topic that was weighing on his mind.

"True; I improvised several paragraphs of nonsense on the spur of the moment, though now I really can't recall just what it was."

"You said that heat could be changed into electricity, and vice versa."

"Ah! did I? Then there was a glimmer of reason in that rigmarole. Well, what are you leading up to, my boy?"

"I want first," continued Alvan, gathering courage, "to ask if fires are not sometimes caused by defective wiring—I mean by the electric light wires being too near together and improperly insulated?"

"So it is said. Have you any reason to suppose that the fire in question originated from a defect in wiring?"

Instead of giving a direct answer, Alvan related briefly his experience of Monday forenoon when the big glass plate hanging in the flies of the theatre acted as a mirror and showed him what was taking place in the little second-story room of the crockery store.

"The man I saw there," he concluded, mentioning the name with some reluctance, "was Mr. James Naylor."

Blitzen had been listening to the recital with attention evidently not more than half fixed upon it; now his manner suddenly changed.

"Why did n't you speak of this before?" he demanded, almost sharply.

Alvan named the two principal reasons that had prevented his doing so, adding: "Then, too, I was n't wholly sure, and I thought I ought to be careful what I said, in case I had made a mistake, or—"

"I hardly think you need have any doubts on that score," interposed the conjurer, smiling rather bitterly. "That man Naylor is equal to any villainy, I fear. He appears to have planned this particular one cunningly enough to have avoided discovery had it not been for the lucky chance that brought his operations within the field of your vision. He failed to count upon my magic art," he concluded grimly. "It really seems like poetical justice."

"'Why did n't you speak of this before?'"

"Yes, sir," said Alvan, though not knowing what he was assenting to.

"The idea that such evidence as yours would not be admitted in a court of law is a popular error," Blitzen went on, after a brief silence. "It would be perfectly valid as far as it goes, though perhaps we shall not need to use it in quite the way you had thought of. At any rate that poor boy must be saved, whatever it costs. Surely you did not think I would hesitate."

"N—no, sir," Alvan faltered, reddening at the idea that he should have had any doubts of his patron's thorough kind-heartedness.

"It so happens that, aside from other considerations, there are certain reasons why I should not be unwilling to press this matter against Naylor. Last night I got word of the death of my only son."

"Oh!" exclaimed Alvan, with a sympathy of tone that made up for the lack of words.

"It was not unexpected," continued Blitzen,

"and, though it seems pitiable to say, the news, in one way, was a relief. Partly in consequence of certain disgraceful occurrences he became a victim of the drink habit, and for some years past lived in a private retreat, scarcely more than the wreck of a man. While still a youth he fell under the influence of James Naylor, who taught him to drink and gamble, and who was really the direct cause of his becoming a defaulter."

"I am sorry to hear this, sir," said Alvan, breaking a somewhat uncomfortable silence.

Blitzen heaved a sigh. "The poor boy's troubles are over now, and we must see what can be done to extricate this other lad from his difficulties. You can safely leave the matter in my hands, Alvan. Although I can not decide at this moment how it will be best to act, I shall keep it well in mind and you may depend upon me to see that your friend is set right very soon at whatever cost."

CHAPTER V

THE REAL INCENDIARY

AT the last moment one of the ushers who did duty on the orchestra floor of the Opera House sent word that he would be unable to come. The house was sold from bottom to top, and during the busy ten or fifteen minutes just before the rise of the curtain there would be more than enough work for the entire force. To meet the emergency Alvan was pressed into service. The system of numbering the seats was simple and he was not wholly unused to ushering, and as he could be well enough spared from his duties "behind" at that particular time, he was rather glad than otherwise of the novelty of a little change.

With one of the regular ushers he had charge of the right-hand main aisle, and from seven-forty-five until nearly eight o'clock he was perhaps more active than he ever had been before in his life, rushing back and forth, slamming down seats, directing check-holders to their places, and hurrying up the aisle to meet and attend to those who were following close at each other's heels almost ceaselessly. Despite his inexperience he had been getting on very well and was beginning to be a little proud of his efficiency when, near the end of the rush, he became involved in a most unpleasant episode.

On one of his returns to the head of the aisle he found awaiting him two ladies, one of whom he recognized as Miss Farley, formerly Mr. Jewett's bookkeeper.

"These seats are in the second row, Alvan," she said, after they had exchanged hurried greetings. "My mother is somewhat hard of hearing and so I took care to get them pretty far front."

The checks she handed him were "B15" and "B17" in the centre of the orchestra, and called for the fourth and fifth seats from the end. As he preceded the ladies down the aisle Alvan glanced at row B and, to his surprise, saw that but one seat in it, the fifth, was vacant. Evidently some one had taken a wrong place. Alvan was anticipating no trouble, however, in getting the error corrected until, on reaching the end of the row, he glanced along and discovered that the occupant of the fourth seat was James Naylor. Then there dawned upon him the fear that an unpleasant scene might ensue. With some inward tremor, though with outward calm, he leaned forward in front of the holder of the end seat and addressed Naylor with the formula usual on such occasions:

"Please let me see your check, sir."

Naylor turned upon him scowlingly. "Hey! whose? mine? What do you want to see it for?" he demanded. His face was unduly

flushed, probably with drinking, and he seemed in no very amiable mood.

"Because I think you 're in the wrong seat," Alvan returned pleasantly.

"Humph! think again, sonny. I guess I 'm all right. I 'm where you put me anyhow."

Alvan knew that he had not seated Naylor, else he would surely have remembered it. Evidently, then, the other usher had done so, and, whether by his own blunder or Naylor's misunderstanding, had got him into the wrong place. But of course that was not a matter to be argued over now.

"If I did," Alvan said, not attempting to exculpate himself, "I made a mistake which I hope you will excuse. If you will be so kind as to show me your check I will have things righted in a minute."

"I showed it once and that ought to be enough," returned Naylor gruffly. "I was told to sit here, and here I'm going to sit, see!"

The attention of everybody around the spot

was called to this altercation by now, and Alvan felt his position to be most annoying. His face was getting red and his patience sorely tried. Meanwhile Miss Farley was hardly less uncomfortable than he.

"Don't have any more words with that man," she whispered, plucking at Alvan's sleeve, but the boy's blood was up and he grimly resolved not to be beaten.

"There has been a mistake somewhere," he said, "for these ladies hold the checks for your seat and the next one. Unless you wish to put them to great inconvenience you will allow me to see your check."

"I don't know where I put the thing," grumbled Naylor, beginning to feel in his pockets; then, glancing toward the two ladies, his eye fell on the younger one and his manner changed abruptly.

"Oh, good evening, Miss Farley," he said loud enough for everybody in the vicinity to hear, and attempting a smile that proved to

be half smirk and half leer. "Of course you can have my seat—this seat—of course you can. I 'm mighty sorry the stupidity of these fellows should have given you so much trouble. Here 's the check, young man."

He stepped out into the aisle, disdainfully handing Alvan the check—which proved to be "D15"—and Miss Farley and her mother, the former with an uncomfortably crimson face, passed in and sat down.

After returning to his duties on the stage Alvan mentioned what had taken place, although at the moment Blitzen seemed to pay little heed to his narration.

Blitzen's exhibition was divided into four parts. The first consisted of card tricks and other feats of legerdemain of the simpler sort; the second of more elaborate "experiments" requiring apparatus; the third of a mind-reading seance; and the fourth of the optical illusion with the sheet of plate glass. At the close of part first Alvan received a summons to

wait on his employer. He found him in the green-room pacing the floor with nervous, hurried steps.

"I 've but a moment to spare," he began, when his youthful assistant came in, "and I wish you to listen attentively to what I say. Fortune has favored us unexpectedly. You tell me that James Naylor is in the theatre, near the front of the orchestra. Well, I am planning a little comedy for his benefit that I think may surprise him, and I have taken precautions that he shall not leave us before we are done with him. I wish you to go immediately and give Eliza an account of what you saw last Monday forenoon in the glass. Describe it as accurately and minutely as possible; then leave the rest to me."

Eliza was Gustavus's wife and a remarkably clever, quick-witted young woman. She was described in the bills as "Mademoiselle Elise," and she took an important part in the mind-reading exhibition. After being blindfolded

and seated in an isolated position on the stage, she reads the numbers of bank-notes, described objects borrowed among the audience and held up by Blitzen so that everybody but she could see them, added long columns of figures placed upon a blackboard behind her, performed elaborate multiplications, squared and cubed high numbers in an incredibly short space of time, and did various other equally wonderful things.

Of course there was a good deal of deception involved in all this, and, the better to guard against discovery, Blitzen was in the habit of varying his methods from time to time. One of them, not the least ingenious, was this: Snugly hidden beneath her garments, Mlle. Elise wore a small speaking-tube. The upper end of it, which came out at the back of her neck and thus reached her ear, was covered by her hair, worn low for the purpose; the lower end emerged from the hem of her skirt and was concealed by a bouquet

of flowers hanging from a long cord at her waist. Under pretence of readjusting this bouquet after she was seated, Blitzen slyly connected the tube with another which ran along beneath the stage and terminated in a mouthpiece at the wings. During the seance Gustavus stood at the mouthpiece with the powerful opera-glasses formerly referred to ready to his hand. By looking through the glasses he was enabled to read the numbers on the bank-notes, and distinguish the exact nature of the small articles borrowed by Blitzen from the spectators. Mathematical tables furnished him the means of solving at short notice the problems set for Elise; and the information thus acquired he could communicate to her through the speaking-tube. So that what appeared to the audience as being nothing short of marvellous was really very simple after all.

With no clear idea of what was to result from it, Alvan described to Eliza the scene

he had been witness of, and in which James Naylor had cut so prominent a figure. Then he returned to his usual duties.

In due time the curtain rose on part third of the program. Filled with a lively interest, Alvan followed intently the familiar mind-reading trickery, expecting that at any moment some startling variation might be introduced. For some time he was disappointed. It was not until the end of the seance as usually given that Blitzen came forward and addressed the audience as follows:

"Ladies and gentlemen, most of you know that a certain class of persons, advertising in the newspapers and elsewhere as clairvoyants, pretend to have supernatural powers by which they are enabled to discover the whereabouts of lost or stolen property, penetrate hidden mysteries, and perform other astonishing feats of a like nature. Up to the present Mlle. Elise has not attempted anything of this sort in public, but we have been so far encour-

aged by private trials that she will now endeavor to give you a small exhibition of her capabilities. Though we cannot guarantee entire success, we hope to be able to interest you, or some of you, in the revelations she will essay to make. First, allow me to throw her into a trance."

He executed a series of passes here, and under their supposed influence the young woman became rigid and seemingly unconscious.

"Now," the conjurer proceeded, "will somebody among the audience kindly suggest some test—something that will be of general interest?"

After a short interval a man rose from one of the seats near the middle of the orchestra. Like most magicians, Blitzen occasionally used confederates, and Alvan recognized in this person one of them.

"I should like to ask the lady a question that I think would be of interest to all pres-

ent," he said, with pretended diffidence. "I am inclined to think that every one here would be glad to learn exactly what was the cause of that fire which the boy Hines is charged with having set last Monday night."

There was a general stir at this, and Alvan, turning a watchful eye toward the occupant of "D15," prepared to listen with all his might to what was to come. The magician, however, put on a dubious look, as he said slowly, and as if reluctantly:

"Y—e—s. The test is a little severe, still we can do no worse than fail. We will make the trial." Then, addressing the apparently unconscious girl, he went on, with appropriate gestures, "Mademoiselle, with the aid of the power by which right subdues wrong, by which good prevails against evil, by which truth triumphs over falsehood, I adjure you to search into the dark mysteries of the past and tell us how the fire in the building that lately stood next door originated."

There ensued a breathless pause, during which the attention of the whole house was centred upon Eliza, as she wrinkled her brows in a pretence of the most intense and painful mental effort.

"What you require of me is very difficult," she said at last in an unnatural, hollow-

"'Try, try!' he commanded"

sounding voice. "All is obscure. I can not see."

"Try, try!" he commanded.

She drew a long breath and finally resumed hesitatingly, like a person who is not at all sure of himself: "I see—I see a room, a small room, lighted by one window. It is in the

third—no, the second story of a—is it a factory?—no, it is a sort of store, I can't tell exactly what. There is much litter about the room. There are barrels and boxes, hay and straw, shavings and—and a great deal of inflammable material scattered all about. I see wires upon the wall, two running parallel to each other from the ceiling to the floor. They come in from the street. They are telephone —no, electric lighting wires."

"What time of day is it?" the conjurer asked when she paused.

"The sun is high. It is forenoon, between eleven and twelve. It is—Ah! what is this? The door is opening. A man enters the room, stealthily and as if he had no right to be there. He is listening. All is still. He puts his hand in his pocket and takes out—takes out a—a large jackknife."

"Yes, yes, continue," urged Blitzen, pretending impatience when she stopped. "What is the man doing now?"

"Wait! I can not quite make out. Ah! now I see more clearly. He is busy at the wall with the electric wires. Is he trying to cut them? No; he is scraping off the coating that insulates them. He pauses suddenly, guiltily, and comes to the window, which is open. He looks out, then quickly closes the window and returns to his work upon the wires, for he thinks he is unobserved. He has scraped a section of each wire entirely bare, and is bending the two so that they will nearly touch each other at one point."

As she ceased speaking again there was a profound stillness in the house. No one moved or took his eyes for an instant off the girl, so interested were all in her curious disclosures. That is to say no one moved except the man seated in "D15, orchestra centre." Alvan had so stationed himself that he could keep his eye on James Naylor, and he noticed that he had been fidgeting nervously from time to time, and twice or thrice had made a

movement as if to rise and go out, but, seeming to change his mind, had remained where he was, keeping as still and "small" as possible in his doubtless excited and apprehensive condition. He could not repress a start when the wizard put the next query.

"Can you describe this man?"

"I will try," answered Eliza. "He is neither very tall nor very short. He is rather thickset. He has reddish-brown hair and a good deal of color in his face. His eyes are blue. He is wearing a suit of light checked goods and a necktie of a brilliant hue."

This description, though sufficiently accurate to have been recognized by those in the secret, was hardly marked enough to betray Naylor's identity to anybody else. Evidently Blitzen did not wish to make a public exposure. But the man himself knew well enough who was meant, and in one respect had belied the description. That is to say he had suddenly lost all the florid hue that was habitual to him.

"Can you tell me the man's name?" was Blitzen's next inquiry.

This question had not been expected by Alvan, and it had the effect of fixing his gaze more closely than ever upon Naylor. He soon perceived that it had proved too much for Naylor's equanimity, for, with handkerchief pressed to his mouth, as if he had been taken suddenly ill, he arose unsteadily and went up the aisle toward the doors.

Meantime the girl was answering: "I don't know. You ask too much, I fear." She wrinkled her brows painfully for a moment. "No, I can get nothing more. All has become a blur. I am tired," she concluded, in fretful tones, and, after a few more remarks, the wizard brought this little comedy to an end.

When Naylor reached the exit toward which he had been tending he was intercepted by a polite attendant, behind whom stood two policemen. Mr. Blitzen would like to see him for a few moments in the green-room, he

was civilly informed. If he felt inclined to refuse this invitation, or summons, the sight of the two officers, who looked very big and imposing, must have caused him to change his mind. Without a word of protest he followed his conductor through a private entrance to the stage, and thence into the green-room, where he was bidden to sit down. He was too nervous to do so, however, and occupied himself by walking the floor for what seemed to him a long time. Finally the man returned.

"Mr. Blitzen is before the public just at present," he reported, "and I shall have to ask you to wait a while yet."

As a matter of fact part fourth of the entertainment was in progress, and the conjurer did not intend to have his interview with Naylor until the final curtain had been rung down. Naylor may or may not have suspected this, but his anxiety and impatience got the better of his prudence, and he burst out angrily with:

"'What do you want with me?'"

"See here, young fellow, I can't hang 'round here all night—"

He stopped suddenly, for he discovered that the pair of stalwart officers had followed him from the front of the theatre, and were standing just outside the door. After a short struggle his prudence resumed its control.

"I suppose I shall have to wait if he says so," he finished sullenly, and the attendant left him to himself.

When the magician at last appeared he was accompanied by Alvan. He entered the green-room with a stern, serious face, and closed the door carefully after him. For a few minutes the two men stood looking at each other silently. Then Naylor, losing his self-control, exclaimed:

"Well, what do you want with me?"

"My name, my real name," said the wizard, disregarding his question, "is Joseph Burton. It is many years since we met, and I have changed a good deal, but I think you will be

able to remember me, and what you did for my unhappy son."

Naylor started, stared, and became more discomposed than ever. Clearly he did remember.

"I sent for you to come here," Blitzen proceeded, "because I wish to talk with you about that fire—the burning of your building last Monday night."

"What about it?" Naylor demanded, trying to appear calm, but without much success.

"No doubt, in the interests of justice, you will be glad to learn that the name of the real incendiary is known to me—"

"Humph! so it is to me," Naylor interrupted with a sneer. "The young scamp is in jail for it, and will get his sentence."

"The boy is in jail under a false accusation, as you are well aware, James Naylor," declared Blitzen sternly. "You heard what was said from my stage about the affair, and I noticed that the description of what actually took

place in Mr. Jewett's closet on the day of the fire affected you unpleasantly."

"Pooh! I was n't feeling well; I was taken faint, the air was so close," Naylor tried to explain. "You don't suppose that girl's drivel had anything to do with my leaving, I hope?"

"You know it was not drivel, but a true narration of an actual occurrence; and I could have published your name then and there in connection with it, had I chosen."

"Bah! do you think that folderol would be taken as evidence before an intelligent jury?" asked Naylor, attempting a bluff, though evidently growing more and more uneasy as the interview progressed.

"Perhaps not," the magician returned coolly, "but fortunately I have here an actual eye-witness of your proceedings." He turned and laid his hand on Alvan's shoulder. "This young man," he continued, "who is in my employ, and who formerly worked for Mr. Jewett, was on the stage here last Monday

forenoon, and saw you at work among the combustible material in the closet. He saw you remove the insulation from the wires, and make other preparations for carrying out the scheme whereby you hoped the electric current would help to sell your property to the unsuspecting fire insurance company for cash. Now don't waste time by attempting to deny it," he wound up sharply.

The accused man's nerve was fast leaving him. He realized that he was cornered and at the wizard's mercy.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he demanded morosely, after a brief silence.

"What is right, nothing more. Withdraw your charge against the Hines boy and get him out of jail."

"What! and get myself in? I should like to know how I should be the gainer by such a proceeding as that?"

"You need n't get yourself into jail necessarily, although you deserve to be there if man

ever did," said the magician severely. "Write out and sign a confession of your sole responsibility for the fire, and give it to me. That is all I require of you."

"Humph! what guarantee have I that you won't have me arrested by those two fellows whom you have seen fit to station beside the door there?" Naylor asked suspiciously.

"Only my word," was the cold reply. "Those men know nothing about your doings—yet. It will depend upon yourself whether or not I make a charge against you and put you in their hands. I think, Mr. Naylor, you will decide to trust me."

And, after a few moments of consideration, Naylor thought so, too.

. . . . . .

As the instrument of poor Wallace's release Alvan found himself fairly overwhelmed with thanks. Indeed, he was embarrassed to know what to do with so much gratitude. Wallace declared again and again that he would do

anything in the world to repay his kindness, and finally Alvan told him that if he was so eager there was one thing he might do, namely: go with him to Mr. Jewett and tell the exact truth about the breaking of the Chinese vase. Whereat Wallace proved his sincerity by offering to set out at once.

Mr. Jewett's ill-feeling against Alvan had evaporated long ago, and he apologized for his misapprehension in the handsomest manner. In fact, he went a good way beyond an apology.

"Alvan, you were by all odds the best boy I ever had, or have had to this day," he declared warmly, "and I was very sorry to lose you. Now why can't you come back to me again? I am going into a brand-new store shortly, in that fine brick block just being finished opposite the post-office. It will have an elevator and steam heat and all the modern improvements you can think of. It will be much easier to do work in than the old place,

and I 'll give you good wages—considerably better than you had before. Beside which you shall have every opportunity possible to

" Fairly embarrassed with thanks "

rise in time to the very top, if you 've got it in you, which I 'm certain you have. Now is n't that an offer worth considering? Come, what do you say?"

Taken utterly by surprise, Alvan was not prepared to say anything at the moment, and so he asked for a short delay for consideration. This was willingly accorded, and he straightway reported the crockery man's proposition to Blitzen, by whom he was counseled to accept it.

"I am sure it will be best for you in the end," the magician remarked. "Naturally I shall regret very much the necessity of parting with you, Alvan, but I wish to advise you for your own interests solely. Now tell me candidly, my dear boy, do you think you ever would become a really eminent, first-class performer if you were to keep on at the profession for five, ten or fifteen years longer?"

Alvan did not answer immediately. For several moments he hung his head in some confusion. Then, with a half laugh and a whole blush, he said:

"N—no, sir; I do not, honestly. That is not —not anywhere near your equal, sir."

"I am inclined to be of your opinion—without offence, my boy," said Blitzen, laying his hand on Alvan's shoulder paternally. "Like poets, magicians are born, not made. You might attain to a fair degree of proficiency, but that is not enough. You don't want to content yourself with being merely a clever mountebank, with a bag of more or less familiar tricks to amuse school children on a holiday, or amaze gaping rustics at a county fair. Whatever you choose as your life work you hope and intend to excel in, if I estimate you rightly. I have been happily able to help you over a rough place in the path of your life, and I shall always recall our connection with pleasure, but now I can not do otherwise than recommend you to accept Mr. Jewett's proposal. May good fortune attend you always!"

So Alvan returned to the china and glassware business, and as time goes on the kind-hearted conjurer's good wishes for him seem

likely to be fulfilled. Slowly, perhaps, but very surely he is on his way toward the "top."

Wallace Hines, too, is doing well—so much better, indeed, than might have been feared that it seems as if he must have profited by the severe lesson he received to amend his ways. As for Mr. James Naylor, he fled away in the darkness after writing out his confession, and was seen in town no more.